

“Semantic Features of Verbs In English”

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Abstract:

Language has various semantic features of lexical verbs. These features are dependents of the tenses which used in that reliable language as per the context of its use. Every language has same tenses. Present perfect tense is usually divided into several types; however, analysis of tangible examples shows that such classifications into types depend on the context and on some semantic features of verbs. The paper flashes the interaction between such features and present perfect with the examples from the contemporary British novel. As per the context of the sentences, the situation of the meaning of sentence is changed. The discussed examples describes to the subsequent tendencies in such interaction: telic and brief situations usually indicate that the goal was reached, while the stative and durative situations usually entail continuation or experience long-lasting up to the point of speech (often in the progressive aspect).

Key words:

Language, Duration, English, tenses present perfect, stative, telicity

The tenses in English or any other languages are so important. Present perfect is the most complex finite verb forms in English language, due to its precise chronological structure (condition preliminary in the past, long lasting to the point of speech and perhaps after it) and due to the other mechanism incorporated in its explanation. Many scholars attempt to clarify it using a set of temporal and non-temporal features, separating its uses into a number of types, which are often, directly or indirectly connected to certain semantic features of lexical verbs. Someone frequently faces problems, because sometimes the temporal components, the semantic structure of verbs and the context create a complex cord of interdependence and influence the type of the present perfect in different ways.

Thomson & Martinet usually discuss present perfect inside the class of tense, and the some more theoretically oriented and comprehensive grammars like The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language (Huddleston & Pullum). They latter treats present perfect as a non-deictic past tense within the section “Perfect Tense”, the secondary tense system. According to Huddleston & Pullum, the secondary past tense system includes the perfect as the marked member, and the non-perfect, as the unmarked member. (139) Its

chronological features are anxious, on the time-line present perfect occupies a part of the past reaching up to the instant of speech, and perhaps a part of the future. H. Reichenbach uses the following formula to define present perfect: E – S, R (event in the past, reference point and the point speech coinciding) This is how he distinguishes it from the past non-progressive, defined as R, E – S (reference point and event coinciding in the past, before the point of speech). (290)

In somewhere present perfect is included into English aspectual oppositions, and some authors include it into the category of phase. Comrie writes, “Perfect is a rather different aspect from the progressive, because “it tells us nothing about the situation in itself, but rather relates some state to a preceding situation”. (52) Comrie also flashed, “Some inherent or semantic properties of lexical verbs “interact with other aspectual oppositions, either prohibiting certain combinations, or severely restricting their meaning.” (41) These properties may include punctual and durative, telic and atelic, as well as stative and dynamic situations. These properties give the impression to play an important role in the interpretation of present perfect in a specific context. States are non-dynamic, homogeneous, but without the dynamic segments, they have probable period and do not entail a goal. Accomplishments are dynamic situations ending after some period when a natural fatal point, a goal, reached, while achievements are momentary situations. These three general semantic features: stativity, duration, and telicity are its primary base.

The present perfect typically divided into four basic types, which related to some semantic features of verbs. Such as (i) the perfect of result, (ii) the perfect of recent past, (iii) the perfect of persistent situation and (iv) the empirical perfect, but Leech explains other divisions like: (i) state-up-to-the-present, (ii) indefinite past, (iii) habit-in-a-period-leading-up-to-the-present and (iv) regulative past. (36-40) The second division has some general components of the lexical meanings of verbs (stativity, duration or period) or the meanings implied in the syntactic context (habit, repetition, result), as per the significant link between components, context and the interpretation of present perfect. When one analyses the above-mentioned link between aspect and certain semantic features within the English present perfect, it seems that the semantic features of verbs usually do not prohibit the use of present perfect, but in some cases, they might require a specific type of perfect. Actually, certain semantic features like telicity, duration, stativity seem to influence the very type of present perfect, for example the telic situations often lead to the perfect of result, and the stative ones to the perfect of persistent situation.

The typical stative situation implies probable period, it is homogeneous, and it lacks dynamic segments, so, it could be, subdivided into temporal segments only. It does not have a goal and it ends when another dynamic situation changes the existing state. Therefore, it is logical to expect that the stative verbs would have to select the context compatible with these features. The copulative verb is, typically followed by a prepositional phrase or a noun phrase, denoting presence or existence of a certain state, for example:

(1a) Anju has never been inside the place.

(1b) Haven't you ever been in love, then?'

(2a) ...he took a post at a university on the north side of Maharashtra, where he has been ever since, now occupying a personal Chair.

(2b) ...you've been a tremendous asset to the Department, even in the short time you've been here.

(2c) 'He's been with the company a long time.'

In the above examples, it seems that the feature stativity excluded the notion of result or of recent past, which was to be expected. These examples belong to the experiential perfect (1a, b) or the perfect of persistent situation (2a, b, c.). Experiential perfect, is accompanied by the usual adverbials (ever, never), and the perfect of persistent situation by the temporal adverbials for duration. The verbs of inert perception and cognition could be illustrated with the following examples:

(3a) 'You've heard about Industry Year, Anju?'

(3b) 'I've seen her before', he said.

(3c) 'Haven't you noticed the way he's carrying on?'

These verbs, like some of the above-mentioned states, indicate experiential perfect (3a, b.). In other words, it seems that the verbs of perception in 't tend to indicate that a certain perception occurred at least once in the period up to now, perhaps with repetition, but without continual, uninterrupted duration. The example (3c), it could denote experience up to now or recent past. Unlike states, typical dynamic situations require some input of energy for the realization of the process they denote and they imply a repetition of dynamic segments. These situations are usually subdivided into several groups; the division into activities and process verbs is relevant for this discussion (Quirk 95-96), the former requiring a conscious agent, the latter not. The basic features related to these situations are possible duration and possible telicity.

This feature can be related both to stative and dynamic verbs; states, activities and accomplishments have the feature [+duration], and achievements the feature [-duration]. Having discussed the states, we could start from the examples with the situations denoting some duration, and these examples include typical activity verbs like dance, do, eat, laugh, learn, live, make, read, spend, stare, stay, take, wait, write. For example:

(4a) ...like clamorous patients who have been waiting all night for the doctor's surgery to open;

(4b) The heads of other men present have been swiveling from side to side, like spectators in a tennis match, during this argument.

(4c) The students who have been writing everything down now look up and smile wryly at Rajan Roi, like victims of a successful hoax.

(4d) Rajan Roi looks up from the copy of North and South from which she has been reading this passage, and surveys her audience with cool, grey-green eyes.

(4e) 'They've learned what's expected of them in a patriarchal society.'

(4f) 'I haven't danced for ages.'

(4g) 'I don't think I've ever read that one.'

(4h) Whereas you've been working for yourself in the company's time.

Most of these examples with the above-mentioned verbs indicate continuation from the unspecified point or period in the past to the present moment, thus belonging to the type called perfect of persistent situation (4a, b, c, d, h). The example (4f) is a specific kind

Semantic Features of Verbs and Types of Present Perfect in English of the perfect of persistent situation because it denotes the continuation of the non-existence of a situation (not dancing for ages). However, in the example (4e), which implies a reached goal (what's expected of them), the type of perfect is the perfect of result or recent past, and in the example with the adverbial ever (4g) the type is experiential perfect – implying that the subject did not have a certain experience (reading a certain book).

The second group of examples, those with the feature [– duration], or momentary verbs, includes the verbs like appear, arrive, ask, borrow, bring, close down, decide, deliver, discover, finish, invite, lend, meet, offer, pay, reach, reduce, sell out, split up, start, trigger. Some of the typical examples are:

(5a) The pressure of his foot on a wired pad under the stair-carpet triggered the burglar alarm...

(5b) She carries the Daily Mail, which has just been delivered.

(5c) Mani has now appeared at the lounge window...

(5d) Anju grunts, unsurprised that his Marketing Director has not yet arrived.

(5e) 'Have you brought me to the phone just to tell me that?' Rajan Roi inquired icily.

(5f) 'I've sent off that reference to Rashia.'

As expected, momentary verbs typically denote the situation immediately preceding the moment of speech, which is often accompanied by the adverbials just and now (examples 5b, 5c), or yet in case of the non-realization of the circumstances (5d). In the examples without adverbials modifying present perfect, the implication is also immediate or very near past (examples 5a, e, f). Therefore, these examples belong to the perfect of recent past. However, some momentary verbs with adverbials denoting frequency (never, ever) also indicate experience up to now, which classifies them into the empirical perfect.

There are just a few such examples imply a context, which unambiguously indicates repetition of the momentary circumstances up to now, most of them with the verb meet. This verb is interesting to point out the difference between the perfect of recent past and the empirical perfect: with the adverbials like just, recently, this verb is interpreted as recent past, and with the adverbials like ever, before as empirical perfect.

Telicity is the feature in the semantic structure of some dynamic lexical verbs and verb phrases, which denotes the continuation of a goal. This goal could be indicated by the presence of the direct object, adverbial particle or other syntactic elements. The following examples (and some of the above-mentioned) indicate the presence of a goal:

(7a) Mr. Raj has now, strictly speaking, left the city of Rummage and passed into an area known as the Dark Country...

(7b) 'Have you signed the Official Secrets Acts?'

(7c) Halted at a red light, Roi consults her A to Z, but before she has found the place on the map, the lights have changed and cars are hooting impatiently behind her.

(7d) Anyway they've just discovered that compulsory retirement is unconstitutional...

(7e) 'Mr. Raj has dropped his pen, Marry,' she said.

(7f) 'I'll tell consume that I've changed my mind.'

As it has been pointed out, if the non-progressive verb is followed by a well-defined object (NP or a nominal clause), it usually implies a goal (examples 7a, b, c, d, e, f). The combination of the feature [+telicity] with the present perfect (non-progressive) indicates that the goal was reached immediately before, or a short time before the point of speech, which is typically interpreted as the perfect of recent past (the examples under 7) or perhaps the perfect of result.

To conclude the basic semantic features taken into account (stativity, duration, telicity) do not forbid the use of present perfect; however, they influence the understanding of the types of perfect.

It turned out that the stative verbs excluded the perfect of result and recent past, which follows from the fact that they are atelic. Therefore, their most recurrent interpretations were the empirical perfect and the perfect of persistent circumstances in cases when these verbs denoted continuative situations. On the other hand, dynamic verbs which were durative and atelic typically belonged to the perfect of persistent situation, denoting a situation which continued from a point or period in the past up to now. Telic dynamic verbs usually belonged to the perfect of recent past, implying that the goal of the situation was reached in the near past.

It is interesting to point out that only some examples, which could be interpreted as both recent past and result. Moreover, the notion of result is rather subjective, which has been pointed out in the relevant literature. For example, Comrie writes that, "In the perfect of result a present state is referred to as being the result of some past situation" (56), adding that this type of perfect assumes that the result is still significant, but it "makes no claims what constitutes a continuing result, only that there is some continuing result". (57)

Finally, to conclude, one could say that English perfect denotes a link between a preceding circumstances and a following situation in the past, present and future. In addition, there seems to be some interdependence between certain semantic features of lexical verbs and these types of perfect, so stativity, telicity, and duration should taken into account when interpreting present perfect.

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